

Working at the Intersection of Faith, Art, and Justice: The Impact of Socially Engaged Art
Practices on U.S. Christian Churches and their Communities

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Abstract

This project documented socially engaged art practices of three U.S. Christian churches and the impacts of those practices on participants, the congregation as a whole, and the wider community. Socially engaged art seeks to create social change through direct intervention in the world, rather than through representational or symbolic means. As churches experiment with how to adapt to societal change, declining membership, and shifting ways of communicating and relating, socially engaged art can be a new mode of caring for their communities and supporting the spiritual growth of their members. The case study found that the congregations' socially engaged art ministries have helped them adapt to their local context and connect with their neighbors in new ways. The study cites several promising practices and concludes that socially engaged art ministry is an emerging practice that will benefit from further study and deeper engagement with the field of contemporary socially engaged art.

Keywords: socially engaged art, social practice, missional church, theology and the arts, U.S. Christian churches, adaptive change

Introduction

Purpose

This paper explores the impacts of socially engaged art on three U.S. churches and their communities, through reporting and analyzing the findings of a multi-site case study. The case study examined three socially engaged art programs operated by Episcopal, Lutheran, and Methodist churches, and the study findings are in the form of a report intended for current and future practitioners of similar programs. The purposes of this study are to describe and interpret the experiences of the churches' socially engaged art practices, and to examine how these practices can help churches adapt to their changing societal context and pursue their mission in the 21st century. Socially engaged art is discussed in more detail below, but can be summarized as “a distinct art form that is explicitly predicated on relationships of care and is aimed at ‘repairing broken communities’ and mending the world at large” (Alacovska, 2020, p. 733).

In this paper I will be referring to God and other religious concepts as understood in Western Trinitarian Christianity. The congregations in the case study are in this religious tradition; they are part of Mainline U.S. church denominations (defined below) that base their beliefs on the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, the Apostles' and Nicene creeds, and the councils of the early church (Macquarrie, 1977).

Mainline U.S. churches are Protestant (i.e. not Roman Catholic) denominations that are theologically and socially moderate or progressive, especially as compared to evangelical churches. These denominations are navigating historic changes to their context: growing numbers of Americans with no religious affiliation, the forces of deindustrialization and globalization, and new generational and cultural attitudes towards spirituality, social ties, and institutions. These changes are described in more detail below. Churches must develop new structures and practices to adapt to this fluid environment, which will require experimentation, risk-taking, and creativity. The challenge for churches lies in overcoming the internal resistance to change, risk aversion, inertia, and insular thinking of those for whom the current structures and practices work.

At the same time, churches are shifting how they understand their purpose and place in the world. For generations, many U.S. Christians have seen church as a haven where believers can come once a week to anticipate their escape from this world and secure their place in the next (Wright, 2014). “Mission work” meant sending specialists (missionaries) somewhere far away to proselytize and convert. Missional theology, defined below, has challenged these ideas. The church is not a building but a body of people, a people called not to withdraw from the world but rather to be deeply engaged in its restoration. Mission is not a specialized activity happening somewhere else, but is a central, shared responsibility: the practice of participating in God’s work and pointing to God’s presence here and now. This shift demands an increase in laypersons’ commitment and spiritual depth at the same time that American culture is decreasingly built around practices like weekly church attendance

and biblical literacy. Churches are searching for ways to inspire greater commitment and deeper spirituality in their members.

This case study began from a hypothesis that socially engaged art can help mainline U.S. churches navigate this period of upheaval and uncertainty and fully incorporate missional theology into their practices. Socially engaged art can allow congregations to experiment with new ways of worshipping, teaching, and building relationships. It can create participatory processes and experiences that shape participants' thinking, behavior, and commitments. It can be a way for congregations with limited resources to create social change and space to glimpse the world as it could be. Further, it pursues these ends through imagination, play, co-creation, and relationship, which depend on peoples' willing participation. This form of influence can be an ethical replacement for cultural hegemony, coercion, appeals to guilt and fear, and other abuses of power that churches have shamefully used in the past (Russell, 2004a; Zscheile, 2017). By examining the impact of socially engaged art practices on the case study sites, this project uncovered evidence in support of this hypothesis and argues for expanding these practices and continuing to study their impact.

Definitions and Background

Socially Engaged Art

Socially engaged art (SEA), also known as participatory art or social practice, seeks to create a process by which artists and participants can directly respond to social issues and impact the social environment. Often, SEA practices occur outside the institutional art

world, in cross-disciplinary collaborations embedded within communities. Rather than an individual artist producing objects or performances for viewers or audiences, a socially engaged artist might facilitate a process or create a space in which people collaborate on a project, event, or intervention. SEA pushes art past representation and into direct engagement in the world, a move captured by socially engaged artist Tania Bruguera: “I don't want an art that points at a thing, I want an art that is the thing” (quoted in Thompson, 2012, p. 21). In short, “SEA can be understood as a collective project in the public sphere centered on a social or community issue” (Maguire & McCallum, 2019, p. 41).

SEA gained attention and emerged as a category of practice in the 1990s and 2000s, but its lineage extends further back in art history. Claire Bishop (2012) traced the “social turn” in Western European art to Italian Futurism, Bolshevik theater, and dada in the early 20th century, and to Situationist International, Happenings, and the Community Arts Movement in the 1960s and 70s. These movements introduced participatory, political, and process- or situation-based elements to traditional art. Michael Birchall (2019) noted the influence of critiques of the institutional art world from groups like the Art Workers Collective and the Guerrilla Girls; Joseph Beuys’s connecting art to social transformation and everyday life; and what Suzanne Lacy called *New Genre Public Art*, practices that were more collaborative, political, and contextual than traditional public art. As Alexis Frasz and Holly Sidford (2017) emphasized in reporting the results of their research on current SEA practices, cultures around the world have made art in this way for millenia. They quoted current SEA leaders who note that “[e]very major social movement throughout time has integrated

creativity/art and activism” and “community-based practices ‘have existed for a long time in low-income communities where artists are doing the work and living it’... even though they often ‘have not been seen or recognized by people outside those communities’” (pp. 4-5).

While Frasz and Sidford (2017) documented the wide variety of contemporary SEA practices, they also found four recurring components: a “belief in the agency and responsibility of art and artists to affect social change”; the use of “‘forms’ and ‘materials’ beyond those used in studio art”; a “relational, collaborative process...[which] is often a core part of the artistic ‘product’”; and “subject matter that addresses social, political or economic issues” or that is a form of cultural expression for “a group whose opportunities for creative voice have been limited by poverty, assimilation, or oppression” (p. 11).

Changing Church Context

As technology, globalization, changing demographics, and shifting generational preferences transform society, churches are striving, and often struggling, to adapt. In the face of these seismic cultural shifts, church leaders have recognized the necessity of adapting their structures, programs, funding, and missions to rapidly shifting contexts, and in the past decades, they have called for experimentation and engagement with new audiences and members (Mission and Public Affairs Council (Church of England), 2004), leading to a wide array of programs and strategies whose long-term results are largely still unfolding. Even the definition of “success” and the criteria by which to evaluate these efforts remain unsettled questions.

U.S. church membership and attendance have declined dramatically in the past two decades, particularly with younger generations, and increasing numbers of people report they belong to no religious group (Smith et al., 2019; Voas, 2013). A 2019 Pew Research Center Report (Smith et al., 2019) found that from 2009 to 2019, the percentage of American adults who identify as Christian dropped twelve points to 65%, and the percentage of those with no religious affiliation grew nine points to 26%. A 2020 Gallup survey found that 47% of Americans belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 70% since 1999 and the first time since Gallup began administering the survey in 1937 that less than half of respondents belong to a house of worship (Jones, 2021).

Aging and declining membership contributes to shrinking church revenue, challenging congregations' expectation of maintaining expensive seminary-trained clergy and aging buildings, and leading to strapped budgets and church closures. More fundamentally, the Church, ever slow to change, is being required to adapt rapidly to postmodernism's impact on ways of knowing, believing, learning, and relating. As Karen Ward described, a "massive shift...has happened in how people view and navigate the world...truth is relative, diversity is normal, objectivity is mythical, science can't save us, power is distributed, hierarchy is flattened, knowledge is networked, life is chaotic, reality bites, mystery happens, and reason is highly overrated" (2010, p. 168). Accompanying this sea change is the end of Christendom, described by Gibbs and Bolger (2005) as the period during which the Church "occupied a central position within Western societies" (p. 17). Beginning with the Roman Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the early 4th

century, the church in Western society increased its societal influence and power. In the U.S., “blue laws” that restrict store hours or liquor sales on Sundays, the ubiquity of Christmas celebrations, and events like the National Prayer Breakfast are all legacies of Christendom. In the era of Post-Christendom, churches can no longer presume their relevance to public life, nor can they rely on common culture to form people’s values, imagination, and worldview in ways conducive to Christian belief and practice. Many Christian leaders welcome the end of Christendom, often based on the insights of feminist and postcolonial theology (Clarke, 2014; Russell, 2004b). Yet without new ways to translate and facilitate engagement with Christianity, churches will grow more irrelevant, alien, and intimidating to those who might otherwise participate.

Despite these challenges, the past decades have also seen a proliferation of models, movements, and trends that are marked by vitality and experimentation, with particular attention to addressing the challenges of relevance and engagement. These post-Christendom experiments go by various terms like emerging church, fresh expressions, missional church, and new monasticism, but regardless of their classification, they are all re-imagining Christian community through participatory and immersive worship, building communities of authenticity and radical inclusion, and service and justice work with their neighbors (Croft et al., 2010; Gibbs & Bolger, 2005; Guder, 2015; Harrold, 2010; Prebble, 2014).

Missional Theology

Traditionally, the nature and purpose of the church was a discrete theological topic, ecclesiology, or it was discussed as part of the theology of salvation. In the early modern era, Jesuits began to use the word “mission,” derived from the Latin for “sending,” to refer to the work of spreading the Christian faith (Bosch, 2011, p. 381). Mission became separated from the work of the church, which was to maintain the faith in the predominantly Christian West; mission societies were founded to send specialists (“missionaries”) to proselytize non-Christian people outside the West (Nikolajsen, 2013). This conception of mission remained the predominant understanding in the Western church for centuries, often legitimizing or complicit in the evils of Western European and American colonialism (Mugambi, 1996; World Council of Churches, 2012).

Over the course of the 20th century, the theology of mission underwent a revolution. Jeppe Nikolajsen (2013) documented three key movements in this transformation: first, international mission conferences began to bridge the division between mission and church, as well as the dichotomy of “Christian West” and the “pagan non-West,” culminating in the 1961 integration of the International Mission Council and the World Council of Churches. Second is the influence of British missionary and theologian Lesslie Newbigin, whose early writings argued that mission is not an auxiliary church program. Instead, mission originates as “an action of God...who is ceaselessly at work in all creation”; the church exists as an instrument of God’s mission, called to bless and care for the world (Franklin, 2015, p. 179). As missiologist David Bosch put it, “There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since

God is a fountain of sending love” (2011, pp. 389–390). Newbigin’s later writings emphasized that modern Western society was undeniably a mission field, as it operated under a worldview that was distinct from Christian theology. Newbigin felt it was important to recognize these distinctions to avoid reading Western values like individualism and an industrial, mechanistic worldview into Christian faith. By distinguishing these two worldviews, “an authentic encounter between the gospel and western culture could take place” (Franklin, 2015, p. 163). Finally, Newbigin’s work was carried forward in North America by groups like the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), which in 1998 produced *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, edited by David Guder. This book marked the first use of the word “missional,” and its approach to missional theology continues to have widespread influence.

The shift towards missional theology began with a recognition of the primacy of God’s mission. Stephanie Spellers (2010) described this mission and its ultimate end:

God is the one who created all that is, cares for that creation like a parent for her children, and will do anything in order to heal and restore her creation and draw all people back into relationship with herself. This dream of restoration, liberation, justice, peace, wholeness, and flourishing—a wondrous, comprehensive vision captured in the Hebrew word *shalom*—is God’s mission. (p. 33)

The church is called to continue Jesus of Nazareth’s proclamation of the good news (“gospel”) that “the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15, NRSV). This kingdom is paradoxically “already-but-not-yet”; though the world is not yet fully set right, God’s reign of *shalom* can

still be inhabited and glimpsed here and now. The church is sent to be a “sign and foretaste” of that reign, offering a glimpse of what God is doing and will do in the world, as well as an “agent and instrument,” acting in the world to bear the kingdom’s blessing (Hunsberger, 2015, pp. 65–66). For most congregations, living fully into this calling to be sign and agent of God’s reign would be a profound shift. For a sense of what this would look like in practice, Edward Prebble named several characteristics found in missional churches: “concrete acts of solidarity and accompaniment,” listening to the local neighborhood or community, “cultivating a welcoming, inclusive community of transformed relationships,” focusing more on supporting people’s spiritual growth than on their participation in congregational life, and embracing “daily offices, observance of feast and fast days, rituals and liturgical vestments” (2014, p. 239)

The implications of missional theology are profound. The church goes from initiating mission work to receiving an invitation to join God’s work already taking place. Instead of happening only in distant lands, missional theologians see God’s mission as happening everywhere, at all times; all Christians are sent out in mission in their everyday lives (Roxburgh, 2011; Zscheile, 2017). Because the church stands in as much need of God’s transforming presence as the rest of the world, Newbigin saw its mission work with others as a “two-way encounter,” a mutually transformative dialogue in which the “preunderstandings, prejudices, and plausibility structures of both parties become manifest” (Franklin, 2015, p. 180). The church is not synonymous with the gospel or the kingdom, and so must be humble and self-inquiring. Finally, in Bosch’s formulation, the church is not “a

place where certain things happen” but “a body of people sent on a mission” (as cited in Hunsberger, 2015, p. 34). The emphasis is not on recruiting new members to join the club and come to the building, but rather on daily entering more deeply into God’s reign so as to allow others to experience it too.

Research Questions

The primary research questions for this project were, when mainline Protestant U.S. congregations practice socially engaged art:

- How do participants perceive the impacts?
- What changes occur in the church and community?
- What new knowledge, behaviors, and skills result?

Literature Review

Though no direct studies could be found of SEA practiced by churches, the literature does offer some clues on the role it might play within a church system and the impacts it might produce. The literature is organized into three themes:

1) contemporary art as a source of theological insight, 2) SEA’s theoretical compatibility with missional theology, and 3) how aesthetic and embodied experiences shape human knowledge, values, and behavior.

Theological Source

Steven Félix-Jäger, a visual artist and Pentecostal theologian, considered the challenges that conceptual art might present to a theological aesthetics whose view of creation is based in the physical world (2016). Conceptual art is an important precursor to SEA, given how much of SEA is not material-based. How Félix-Jäger reconciled conceptual art and theological aesthetics is less important than the impact of the exercise: "conceptual art contributes to theology a new way of seeing God's action in the world" (p. 672).

Maria Reyes Eugenia Fee (2019) went even further in her doctoral dissertation, a theological reading of the social practice of Theaster Gates, an artist and urban planner whose restorative work in his Chicago neighborhood is often held up as an exemplar of socially engaged art practice. Following theologians like Colin Gunton, David Brown, and Robert K. Johnston, Fee sees culture and cultural products as legitimate means of theological knowledge. Through experiencing the hospitality and homemaking of Gates's work, Fee argued, participants can more deeply understand God's welcome and faithful care. Crucially, this experience not only confirms existing beliefs, but invites a "fresh reframing" (p. 2) of tradition that challenges and unsettles the status quo: "the critical nature of Gates's art falls in line with theologian Willie James Jennings's diagnosis of a diseased Christian imagination that necessitates a recuperative prescription of place making and the deployment of an iconic vision" (p. 3).

Academic theology is only a small part of how theology is developed; much of theology is worked out within the lived, communal experience of Christians, or what Anglican theologian Rowan Williams called the *celebratory* style of theological activity (2000). If SEA can be a theological source, then one of its impacts could be on the lived theology of the Christians who participate in it.

Means of Mission

Several authors have framed SEA in ways that align with missional theology's call to participate in and point to God's restoration of the world. In a phenomenological study, Alacovska (2020) described creative work as a way artists care for the world, seeing SEA in particular as an other-oriented practice that forms relationships of solidarity by which the community is cared for. This way of caring for the world through restoring relationships with others is compatible with missional theology.

Arts activist and scholar Paul J. Kuttner (2013) used a portraiture methodology to profile Mariama White-Hammond, the Executive Director of Project HIP-HOP, a Boston arts nonprofit that engages and organizes youth through hip-hop. Through his study, Kuttner sought to answer the question, "What leads an individual to live at the intersection of art and organizing?" (p. 87). In response, White-Hammond first pointed to her upbringing in the Black Church, which provided her with love, racial pride, and a calling "to really figure out how you create a world where people can be doing well" (p. 91). As Executive Director of Project HIP-HOP, White-Hammond adopted a cultural organizing approach that combines

creativity and community organizing, in alignment with the values and sense of mission she received from her early spiritual community. White-Hammond's work demonstrates how, at an individual level, practicing SEA can be a response to a missional call, and it suggests the possibility that this dynamic could be "scaled up" to encompass an entire congregation.

An ongoing tension in SEA is between a more avant-garde, antagonistic strain that sees its proper role as to shock, disturb, and unsettle, on its own terms, and a more community-based, affirmative strain that seeks to make a positive social impact in the world, often in cooperation with other sectors (Bishop, 2012; Finkelpearl, 2014; Jackson, 2011). A critique of the latter is that it is too easily co-opted by the corrupting forces that the former seeks to expose and destabilize. This longstanding tension introduces the question of how U.S. congregations' involvement in SEA would be perceived. Martin Luther King, Jr's "Letter from a Birmingham jail" (1968), written to eight white Alabama clergymen, is perhaps the most famous indictment of moderate religion's adherence to polite bourgeois morality over radical, revolutionary social change.

Roger Rothman's (2019) analysis of the experimental art community Fluxus, however, might offer a third way by which less radical church communities could nonetheless participate in making space for a new world through SEA. In the 1960s and 70s, Fluxus artists began creating works and events that were unassuming, everyday, and pleasant, in sharp contrast to avant-garde art's revolutionary zeal and rejection of the status quo. In his chapter "Fluxus and the joys of small and slow," Rothman challenged the art world's subsequent critical appraisal of Fluxus as "simply too affirmative, too playful, too silly—in short, too

uncritical—to merit attention” (p. 21). Rothman drew on Eugene Holland’s description of a slow-motion general strike, a “gradual process by which the new is affirmed and emerges, little by little, within the cracks of the system and that provides not only a promise of some distant future of freedom, but also ‘immediate value’ in the ‘here and now’” (p. 27). Fluxus, he argued, should not be dismissed as insufficiently avant-garde, but as practicing a form of SEA that “works not by negation, but by *accretion*” (p. 26). Fluxus can serve as an example of SEA that corresponds with missional theology’s commitment embodying a new social order at a small scale. This form of mission could be what Diane Becker called *microutopias*, noting that these “microutopic communities—small locations of utopian interaction... attempt to create physical manifestations of an ideal ‘humanity’ in an inhumane world” (2012, p. 68). Following Fluxus’s example, missional congregations could participate in the radical transformation of the world through small acts of solidarity, joy, and connection.

Formation & Transformation

In their volume *The role of the arts in learning: cultivating landscapes of democracy*, Hanes and Weisman (2018) and other contributors offered an overview of the ways that aesthetic experiences are a means of learning and formation of worldview and character, a line of thinking going back to John Dewey. In their opening chapter, they argued for collaborative, community-based arts education as a way of counteracting the influence of neoliberalism and promoting civic participation in democracy. They pointed to the crucial role of imagination in enabling ethical thinking and collective action for the common good.

The role of art within the educational process is a specialized case of a larger discussion regarding aesthetic and embodied cognition, which is happening across philosophy, neuroscience, and psychology. Philosopher Angela Breitenbach made the argument that “[e]xperiences of beauty and achievements of understanding have at their basis one imagination” (2020, p. 72). Humans use the same mental faculty to generate new theories, grasp complex ideas, engage with and appreciate art; they imagine possibilities, spot connections, rearrange their knowledge into a new unified form. Robert Root-Bernstein looked at the role of imagination, emotion, and intuition in scientific discovery, a phenomenon he calls *aesthetic cognition*, which “combines knowledge and feeling into synosic intuition that has an analyzable ‘meta-logic’ which is the basis for creative scientific thinking” (2002, p. 62). Scientists often come to know what they know, he argued, before they can express it logically in words; emotions enable the discovery of knowledge, rather than clouding rational inquiry. Arguing that there is no discontinuity between our bodies and minds, Mark Johnson has studied embodied knowledge for decades. Humans come to knowledge through our bodies and the sensory experiences they receive through them, “so that all our meaning, thought, and language emerge from the aesthetic dimensions of this embodied activity” (2007, p. 1). If this is the case, Johnson argued, cultural objects can preserve and pass on meaning within the lived experience of the social groups who produce and inherit them. These arguments demonstrate that human thinking, learning, and understanding is not a purely rational process, isolated from emotion, embodiment, and

aesthetic experience. Instead, humans come to know what they know through the interplay of all of these sources.

It follows from aesthetic and embodied cognition that SEA, by engaging participants in imagining and embodying new ways of being in the world, generates new knowledge and learning that can deeply shape participants' actions and worldviews. For churches engaged in SEA, one would expect that the experience would lead to deepened understanding, new knowledge, and expanded imagination. This imaginative, experiential transformation is especially relevant to the adaptive change that contemporary churches are working through.

Statement of Contribution

Although there are many promising hints in the literature, the fields of theology and the arts and practical theology have a gap in literature studying SEA and its place within the changing church. This research's first contribution is to begin to close this gap, and second, it intends to provide theologians and church leaders with greater knowledge of how SEA is currently practiced within congregations and to suggest future directions for theological reflection.

Positionality

This case study is influenced by my position as a Christian and an Episcopal priest in particular. Because these cases are Christian communities, my worldview and values derived from the Anglican Christian faith tradition necessarily impact how I see and interpret the case data. My motivation for studying this topic comes from a personal interest in how the denomination I serve within can adapt to its context. I come to this topic with the belief that the structures and practices of the Episcopal Church need to change, and that innovative, experimental churches are a positive and welcome form of Christian community. I also understand the relationship of churches to their surrounding community through the lens of missional theology.

I was both an insider and outsider in relation to the cases. My theological training, experience as a parish priest, and years of experience within the Episcopal Church means that I could interpret and make sense of aspects the church's practices and participants' experience of them that might not have been understood or noticed by an outsider. This status also means that I may have overlooked important data because of my familiarity with it. However, I do not have a personal connection to any of the interviewees, the congregations, or the art practices. As an outsider I may or may not have had their trust, which may have influenced what they were willing to share or disclose.

Methodology

Overview

A multiple site case study approach was selected to provide an in-depth account of several occurrences of the phenomenon in question (socially engaged art practiced by U.S. mainline churches). This approach also allows for identifying themes from the cases and providing recommendations based on the study, both of which would offer value and promising directions to this nascent field.

Site Selection & Recruitment

The cases were identified through a search of scholarly materials, a general internet search, and through conversations with the Episcopal Church's Staff Officer for Church Planting, a Canon Missioner for Development and congregation-based community organizer, and several clergy colleagues serving churches in different U.S. regions. The parameters for cases were that 1) they be a church, ministry, or affiliated organization of a U.S. mainline Protestant denomination, such as the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); and 2) they had participated in a socially engaged art practice, according to the above description of SEA. I contacted each site by email, explained the project, and obtained permission to study the cases from the program's leaders at each case site.

Data Collection & Analysis

I identified leaders, artists, community participants, and church member participants and conducted between 4 to 8 interviews for each site. I also reviewed their websites, social

media, photographs, internal documents, news coverage, and other documentation of the programs. I coded the interviews to identify themes and patterns. With this data, I generated an in-depth description of the practice, analyzed its impacts, and distilled shared values, challenges, and practices. The study findings and conclusions are found in an accompanying document that is meant to provide context and suggest future practices for current and future practitioners of socially engaged art ministry.

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